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SERMON
ON
CONFIRMATION.

BY

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S E R M O N
O N
C O N F I R M A T I O N.

ACTS VIII. 17.

*Then laid they their hands on them, and they
received the Holy Ghost.*

THE history, to which these words belong, is this. Philip the deacon, ordained at the same time with St. Stephen, had converted and baptized the people of Samaria: which the Apostles at Jerusalem hearing, sent down to them Peter and John, two of their own body; who, by prayer, accompanied with imposition of hands, obtained for them a greater degree, than they had yet received, of the sacred influences of the Divine Spirit: which undoubtedly was done on their signifying in some manner, so as to be understood, their adherence to the engagement, into which they had entered at their baptism.

From this and the like instances of the practice of the Apostles, is derived, what Bishops, their successors, though every way beyond comparison inferior to them, have practised ever since, and which we now call Confirmation. Preaching was common to all ranks of ministers; baptizing was performed usually by the lower rank; but, perhaps to maintain a due subordination, it was reserved to the highest, by prayer and laying on of hands, to communicate further measures of the Holy Ghost. It was indeed peculiar to the Apostles, that on their intercession, his extraordinary and miraculous gifts were bestowed: which continued in the Church no longer, than the need of them did; nor can we suppose, that all were partakers of them. But unquestionably by their petitions they procured, for every sincere convert, a much more valuable, though less remarkable blessing, of universal and perpetual necessity, his ordinary and saving graces.

For these therefore, after their example, trusting that God will have regard, not to our unworthiness, but to the purposes of mercy which He hath appointed us to serve, we intercede now, when persons take upon themselves the vow of their baptism. For this good end being now come amongst you, though I doubt not but your ministers have given you proper instructions on the occasion; yet I am desirous of adding somewhat further, which may not only acquaint more fully those, who are especially concerned, with the nature of what they are about to do: but remind you all of the obligations, which

Christianity

CONFIRMATION.

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Christianity lays upon you. And I cannot perform it better, than by explaining to you the Office of Confirmation, to which you may turn in your Prayer-Books, where it stands immediately after the Catechism.

There you will see, in the first place, a preface, directed to be read; in which, notice is given, that *for the more edifying of such as receive Confirmation*, it shall be administered to none but those, *who can answer to the questions of the Catechism* preceding: that *so Children may come to years of some discretion*, and *learn what the promise made for them in baptism was*, before they are called upon to *ratify and confirm it before the Church with their own consent*, and to *engage that they will evermore observe it*.

Prayers may be offered up for infants with very good effect. Promises may be made in their name by such as are authorized to act for them: especially when the things promised are for their interest, and will be their duty; which is the case of those in baptism. But no persons ought to make promises for themselves, till they reasonably well understand the nature of them, and are capable of forming serious purposes. Therefore, in the present case, being able to say the words of the Catechism is by no means enough, without a competent general knowledge of their meaning, and intention of behaving as it requires them; which doubtless they are supposed to have at the same time. And if they have not, making a profession of it, is declaring with their mouths what they feel not in their hearts at the in-

stant, and will much less reflect upon afterwards : it is hoping to please God by the empty outward performance of a religious rite, from which if they had been withheld, till they were duly qualified, their souls might have been affected, and their conduct influenced by it, as long as they lived.

Therefore I hope and beg, that neither ministers nor parents will be too eager for bringing children very early to Confirmation : but first teach them carefully, to know their duty sufficiently, and resolve upon the practice of it heartily ; then introduce them to this ordinance : which they shall not fail to have opportunities of attending in their neighbourhood, from time to time, so long as God continues my life and strength.

But as there are some too young for Confirmation, some also may be thought too old : especially, if they have received the holy Sacrament without it. Now there are not indeed all the same reasons for the Confirmation of such, as of others ; nor hath the Church, I believe, determined any thing about their case, as it might be thought unlikely to happen. But still, since it doth happen too frequently, that persons were not able, or have neglected, to apply for this purpose : so whenever they apply, as by doing it they express a desire to *fulfil all righteousness* * ; and may certainly receive benefit, both from the profession and the prayers, appointed in the Office ; my judgment is, that they should not be rejected, but encouraged.

* Matt. iii. 15.

CONFIRMATION.

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Only I must intreat you to observe, that when you take thus on yourselves the engagement of leading a christian life, you are to take it once for all; and no more to think of ever being confirmed a second time, than of being baptized a second time.

After directing, Who are to be confirmed, the Office goes on to direct, How they are to be confirmed. And here, the Bishop is to begin with asking every one of those, who offer themselves, whether they do, *in the presence of God and of the congregation, renew in their own persons the solemn vow of their baptism; acknowledging themselves bound to believe and to perform all those things, which their godfathers and godmothers then undertook for them.* On which, they are each of them to answer, with an audible voice, *I do.*

Now the things promised in our name, were, to renounce whatever God hath forbidden, to believe what He hath taught, and to practise what He hath commanded. Nobody can promise for infants absolutely, that they shall do these things; but only, that they shall be instructed and admonished to do them: and, it is hoped, not in vain. This instruction and admonition, parents are obliged by nature to give; and if they do it effectually, godfathers and godmothers have no further concern, than to be heartily glad of it. But if the former fail, the latter must supply the failure, as far as they have opportunity of doing it with any reasonable prospect of success. For they were intended, not to release the parents from the care of their children, which

nothing can : but for a double security, in a case of such importance.

If nothing at all had been promised in our names, we had still been bound, as soon as we were capable of it, to believe in God, and obey Him. But we are more early and more firmly bound, as not only this hath been promised for us, but care hath been taken to make us sensible of our obligation to perform it : which obligation therefore, persons are called upon, in the question under consideration, to ratify and confirm. And great cause have they to answer, that they do. For doing it is a duty, on which their eternal felicity peculiarly depends; as a little attention to what I am about to say will clearly shew you.

Our first parents, even while they were innocent, had no title to happiness, or to existence, but from God's notification of his good pleasure : which being conditional, when they fell, they lost it; and derived to Us a corrupt and mortal nature, intitled to nothing; as both the diseases and the poverty of ancestors often descend to their distant posterity. This bad condition we fail not, from our first use of reason, to make worse, in a greater or less degree, by actual transgressions : and so personally deserve the displeasure, instead of favour of Him, who made us. Yet we may hope, that, as He is good, He will on our repentance forgive us. But then, as He is also just and wise, and the ruler of the world; we could never know with certainty, of ourselves, what his justice and wisdom, and the honour of his govern-
ment

ment might require of Him with respect to sinners: whether He would pardon greater offences at all; and whether He would reward those, whom He might be pleased not to punish. But most happily the revelation of his holy word hath cleared up all these doubts of unassisted reason: and offered to the worst of sinners, on the condition of faith in Christ, added to repentance, and productive of good works (for all which He is ready to enable us,) a covenant of pardon for sins past, assistance against sin for the future, and eternal life in return for a sincere, though imperfect, and totally undeserving obedience.

The method of entering into this covenant is, being baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost: that is, into the acknowledgment of the mysterious union and joint authority of these Three; and of the distinct offices, which they have undertaken for our salvation: together with a faithful engagement of paying suitable regard to each of them. In this appointment of Baptism, the washing with water aptly signifies, both our promise to preserve ourselves, with the best care we can, pure from the defilement of sin, and God's promise to consider us, as free from the guilt of it. Baptism then, through his mercy, secures infants from the bad consequences of Adam's transgression, giving them a new title to the immortality which he lost. It also secures, to persons grown up, the intire forgiveness of their own transgressions, on the terms just mentioned. But then, in order to receive these benefits, we must lay our claim to the covenant, which

conveys them: we must ratify, as soon as we are able, what was promised in our name by others before we were able; and done for us then, only on presumption that we would make it our own deed afterwards. For if we neglect, and appear to renounce our part of the covenant, we have plainly not the least right to God's performing His: but we remain in our sins, and *Christ shall profit us nothing* *.

You see then of what unspeakable importance it is, that we take on ourselves the vow of our baptism. And it is very fit and useful, that we should take it in such form and manner as the office prescribes. It is fit, that when persons have been properly instructed, by the care of their parents, friends, and ministers, they should with joyful gratitude acknowledge them to have faithfully performed that kindest duty. It is fit, that before they are admitted by the Church of Christ to the holy Communion, they should give public assurance to the Church of their christian belief and christian purposes. This may also be extremely useful to themselves. For consider: young persons are just entering into a world of temptations, with no experience, and little knowledge to guard them; and much youthful rashness, to expose them. The authority of others over them is beginning to lessen, their own passions to increase, *evil communication* to have great opportunities of *corrupting good manners* †: and strong impressions, of one kind or another, will be made on them very soon. What can then be more necessary, or more likely to pre-

* Gal. v. 2.

† 1 Cor. xv. 33.

serve their innocence, than to form the most deliberate resolutions of acting right; and to declare them in a manner, thus adapted to move them at the time, and be remembered by them afterwards: in the presence of God, of a number of his ministers, and of a large congregation of his people, assembled with more than ordinary solemnity for that very purpose.

But then you, that are to be confirmed, must either do your own part, or the whole of this preparation will be utterly thrown away upon you. If you make the answer, which is directed, without sincerity, it is lying to God: if you make it without attention, it is trifling with him. Watch over your hearts therefore, and let them go along with your lips. The two short words, *I do*, are soon said: but they comprehend much in them. Whoever uses them on this occasion, saith in effect as follows: “ *I do* heartily renounce all the temptations of the devil; all the unlawful pleasures, profits, and honours of the world; all the immoral gratifications of the flesh. *I do* sincerely believe, and will constantly profess, all the articles of the Christian Faith. *I do* firmly resolve to keep all God’s commandments all the days of my life; to love and honour Him; to pray to Him and praise Him daily in private; to attend conscientiously on the public worship and instruction, which He hath appointed; to approach his holy table, as soon as I can qualify myself for doing it worthily; to submit to his blessed will

“ meekly and patiently in all things; to set Him
 “ ever before my eyes, and acknowledge Him in
 “ all my ways. *I do* further resolve in the whole
 “ course of my behaviour amongst my fellow-crea-
 “ tures, to *do justly, love mercy**, speak truth, be dili-
 “ gent and useful in my station, dutiful to my supe-
 “ riors, condescending to those beneath me, friendly
 “ to my equals; careful, through all the relations of
 “ life, to act as the nature of them requires, and
 “ conduct myself so to all men, as I should think it
 “ reasonable that they should do to me in the like
 “ case. Further yet: *I do* resolve, in the govern-
 “ ment of myself, to be modest, sober, temperate,
 “ mild, humble, contented; to restrain every pas-
 “ sion and appetite within due bounds; and to set
 “ my heart chiefly, not on the sensual enjoyments
 “ of this transitory world, but the spiritual happi-
 “ ness of the future endless one. Lastly, *I do* re-
 “ solve, whenever I fail in any of these duties, as
 “ I am sensible I have, and must fear I shall, to
 “ confess it before God with unfeigned concern, to
 “ apply for his promised pardon in the name of his
 “ blessed Son, to beg the promised assistance of his
 “ holy Spirit; and in that strength, not my own,
 “ to strive against my faults, and watch over my
 “ steps with redoubled care.”

Observe then: it is not gloominess and melan-
 choly, that religion calls you to: it is not useless
 austerities, and abstinence from things lawful and
 safe: it is not extravagant flights and raptures: it

* Micah vi. 8.

is not unmeaning or unedifying forms and ceremonies: much less is it bitterness against those who differ from you. But the forementioned unquestionable substantial duties are the things to which you bind yourselves, when you pronounce the awful words, *I do*. Utter them then with the truest seriousness: and say to yourselves, each of you, afterwards, as Moses did to the Jews, *Thou hast avouched the Lord this day to be thy God, to walk in his ways and keep his statutes, and to hearken to his voice: and the Lord hath avouched thee this day to be his; that thou shouldst keep all his commandments, and be holy unto the Lord thy God, as He hath spoken**. It is a certain truth, call it therefore often to mind, and fix it in your souls, that if breaking a solemn promise to men be a sin; breaking that, which you make thus deliberately to God, would be unspeakably a greater sin.

But let us now proceed to the next part of the Office: in which, after persons have confirmed and ratified the vow of their baptism, prayers are offered up, that God would confirm and strengthen them in their good purpose: on both which accounts this appointment is called Confirmation.

Scripture teaches, and sad experience proves, that of *ourselves we can do nothing; are not sufficient*† for the discharge of our duty, without God's continual aid: by which He can certainly influence our minds, without hurting our natural freedom of

* Deut. xxvi. 17, 18, 19.

† John xv. 5. 2 Cor. iii. 5.

will, and even without our perceiving it: for we can influence our fellow-creatures so. Nor is it any injustice in Him to require of us what exceeds our ability, since He is ready to supply the want of it. Indeed, on the contrary, as this method of treating us is excellently fitted both to keep us humble, and yet to give us courage, using it is evidently worthy of God. But then, as none can have reason to expect his help, but those who earnestly desire it, so He hath promised to *give the Holy Spirit only to them that ask Him* *. And to unite Christians more in love to each other, and incline them more to assemble for public worship, our blessed Redeemer hath especially promised, that *where two or three of them are gathered together in his name, He will be in the midst of them* †. And further still, to promote a due regard in his people to their teachers and rulers, the sacred writings ascribe a peculiar efficacy to their praying over those who are committed to their charge. Even under the Jewish dispensation, the family of Aaron were told, that *them the Lord had separated to minister unto Him, and to bless in the name of the Lord* ‡: *and they shall put my name, saith God, upon the children of Israel, and I will bless them* §. No wonder then, if under the Christian dispensation we read, but just before the text, that the Apostles, *when they were come down to Samaria, prayed for the new-baptized converts, that they*

* Luke xi. 13.

† Matt. xviii. 20.

‡ Deut. x. 8.

xxi. 5.

§ Numb. vi. 27.

might receive the Holy Ghost, and in the text, that they did receive it accordingly.

Therefore, pursuant to these great authorities, here is, on the present occasion, a number of young disciples, about to run the same common race, met together to pray for themselves and one another: here is a number of elder Christians, who have experienced the dangers of life, met to pray for those who are just entering into them: here are also God's ministers, purposely come, to intercede with Him in their behalf: and surely we may hope, their joint and fervent petitions will avail and be effectual.

They begin, as they ought, with acknowledging, and in scripture words, that *our help is in the name of the Lord, who hath made heaven and earth* *: it is not in man to direct his own steps †; but his Creator only can preserve him. Then we go on to pronounce the name of the Lord blessed, henceforth world without end, for his readiness to bestow on us the grace which we want. And lastly, in confidence of his goodness, we intreat Him to *hear our prayers, and let our cry come unto Him* ‡.

After these preparatory ejaculations, and the usual admonition to be attentive, *Let us pray*; comes a longer act of devotion, which first commemorates God's mercy already bestowed, then petitions for an increase of it. The commemoration sets forth, that He *hath regenerated these his servants by water*

* Psal. cxxiv. 8.

† Jer. x. 23,

‡ Psal. cii. 11.

and the *Holy Ghost* that is, intitled them by baptism to the enlivening influences of the Spirit, and so, as it were, begotten them again into a state, inexpressibly happier than their natural one; a covenant-state, in which God will consider them, whilst they keep their engagements, with peculiar love, as his dear children. It follows, that He *hath given unto them forgiveness of all their sins*; meaning, that He hath given them assurance of it, on the gracious terms of the Gospel. But that every one of them hath actually received it, by complying with those terms since he sinned last, though we may charitably hope, we cannot presume to affirm: nor were these words intended to affirm it; as the known doctrine of the Church of England fully proves. And therefore let no one misunderstand this expression in the Office, which hath parallel ones in the New Testament*, so as either to censure it, or delude himself with a fatal imagination, that any thing said over him can possibly convey to him a pardon of sins, for which he is not truly penitent. We only acknowledge, with due thankfulness, that God hath done his part: but which of the congregation have done theirs, their own consciences must tell them.

After this commemoration, we go on to request for the persons before us, that God would *strengthen them* against all temptation, and support them under all affliction, by the *Holy Ghost the Comforter*, and *daily increase in them his manifold gifts of grace*:

* Eph. i. 7. Col. i. 14.

which gifts we proceed to enumerate in seven particulars, taken from the prophet Isaiah *; by whom they are ascribed to our blessed Redeemer: but as *the same mind ought to be in us which was in Christ Jesus* †, a petition for them was used in the Office of Confirmation, 1400 years ago, if not sooner. The separate meaning of each of the seven, it is neither easy nor needful to determine with certainty. For indeed, if no more was designed, than to express very fully and strongly, by various words of nearly the same import, a pious and moral temper of mind: this is a manner of speaking both common and emphatical. But each of them may be taken in a distinct sense of its own. And thus we may beg for these our fellow-christians, *a spirit of wisdom*, to aim at the right end, the salvation of their souls; and of *understanding*, to pursue it by right means: *of counsel*, to form good purposes; and of *ghostly* or spiritual *strength*, to execute them: *of useful knowledge* in the doctrines of religion; and *true godliness*, disposing them to a proper use of it. But chiefly, though lastly, we pray, that they may be *filled with the spirit of God's holy fear*: with that reverence of Him, as the greatest and purest and best of beings, the rightful Proprietor and just Judge of all, which will effectually excite them to whatever they are concerned to believe or do. For *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom* ‡.

* Isa. xi. 2.

† Phil. ii. 5.

‡ Psal. cxl. 10.

Having

Having concluded this prayer for them all in general, the Bishop implores the divine protection and grace for each one, or each pair of them, in particular: that as he is already God's professed *child* and *servant*, by the recognition which he hath just made of his baptismal covenant, so *he may continue his for ever*, by faithfully keeping it: *and*, far from decaying, *daily increase in his holy Spirit*, that is, in the fruits of the Spirit, piety and virtue, *more and more*; making greater and quicker advances in them, as life goes on, *until he come to that decisive hour*, when his portion shall be unchangeable in *God's everlasting kingdom*.

And, along with the utterance of these solemn words, he lays his hand on each of their heads, a ceremony used from the earliest ages by religious persons; when they prayed for God's blessing on any one; used by our Saviour, who, *when children were brought to Him, that he should put his hands on them, and pray, and bless them, was much displeased** with those who forbid it; used by the Apostles, after converts were baptized, as the text plainly shews; reckoned in the Epistle to the Hebrews among *the foundations* of the christian profession†; constantly practised, and highly esteemed in the Church from that time to this; and so far from being a popish ceremony, that the papists administer Confirmation by other ceremonies of their own devising, and have

* Matth. xix. 13—15. Mark x. 13—16. † Heb. vi. 1.

laid aside this primitive one; which therefore our Church very prudently restored. And the custom of it is approved, as apostolical, both by Luther and Calvin, and several of their followers, though they rashly abolished it, as having been abused *. But I am credibly informed, that at Geneva it hath lately been restored.

The laying on of the hand naturally expresses good will and good wishes in the person who doth it: and in the present case is further intended, as you will find in one of the following prayers, to *certify those*, to whom it is done, *of God's favour and gracious goodness towards them*: of which goodness they will continually feel the effects, provided, which must always be understood, that they preserve their title to his care by a proper care of themselves. This, it must be owned, is a truth: and we may as innocently signify it by this sign as by any other, or as by any words to the same purpose. Further efficacy we do not ascribe to it: nor would have you look on Bishops, as having or claiming a power, in any case, to confer blessings arbitrarily on whom they please; but only as petitioning God for that blessing from above which He alone can give; yet, we justly hope, will give the rather for the prayers of those whom He hath placed over his people, unless your own unworthiness prove an impediment. Not that you are to expect, on the performance of

* See Camfield's two Discourses on Episcopal Confirmation, 8vo. 1682, p. 23—36.

this good office, any sudden and sensible change in your hearts, giving you, all at once, a remarkable strength or comfort in piety, which you never felt before. But you may reasonably promise yourselves, from going through it with a proper disposition, greater measures, when real occasion requires them, of such divine assistance as will be needful for your support and orderly growth in every virtue of a christian life.

And now, the imposition of hands being finished, the Bishop and Congregation mutually recommend each other to God, and return to such joint and public devotions as are suitable to the solemnity. The first of these is the Lord's Prayer: a form seasonable always, but peculiarly now; as every petition in it will shew to every one who considers it. In the next place, more especial supplications are poured forth, for the persons particularly concerned, to Him who alone can enable them *both to will and to do what is good*; that, as the hand of his minister hath been laid upon them, so *His fatherly hand may ever be over them, and lead them in the only way, the knowledge and obedience of his word, to everlasting life*. After this, a more general prayer is offered up for them and the rest of the congregation together, that God would *vouchsafe*, unworthy as we all are, so to *direct and govern both our hearts and bodies*, our inclinations and actions, (for neither will suffice without the other) *in the ways of his laws, and in the works of his commandments*, that, through *his most mighty protection, both here and ever, we may*
be

be preserved in body and soul: having the former, in his good time, raised up from the dead, and the latter made happy, in conjunction with it, to all eternity.

These requests being thus made, it only remains, that all be dismissed with a solemn blessing: which will certainly abide with you, unless, by wilful sin or gross negligence, you drive it away. And in that case, you must not hope, that your baptism, or your Confirmation, or the prayers of the Bishop, or the Church, or the whole world, will do you any service. On the contrary, every thing which you might have been the better for, if you had made a good use of it, you will be the worse for, if you make a bad one: You do well to renew the covenant of your Baptism in Confirmation: but if you break it, you forfeit the benefit of it. You do well to repeat your vows in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper: it is what all Christians are commanded by their dying Saviour, *for the strengthening and refreshing of their souls*: it is what I beg all, who are confirmed, will remember, and their friends and ministers remind them of: the sooner they are prepared for it, the happier; and by stopping short, the benefit of what preceded will be lost. But if you are admitted to this privilege also, and live wickedly, you do but *eat and drink your own condemnation*. So that all depends on a thoroughly honest care of your hearts and behaviour in all respects.

Not

Not that, with our best care, we can avoid smaller faults. And if we intreat pardon for them in our daily prayers, and faithfully strive against them, they will not be imputed to us. But gross and habitual sins we may avoid, through God's help: and if we fall into them, we fall from our title to salvation at the same time. Yet even then our case is not desperate: and let us not make it so, by thinking it is: for, through the grace of the Gospel, we may still repent and amend, and then be forgiven. But I beg you to observe, that, as continued health is vastly preferable to the happiest recovery from sickness; so is innocence to the truest repentance. If we suffer ourselves to transgress our duty; God knows whether we shall have time to repent: God knows whether we shall have a heart to do it. At best we shall have lost, and more than lost, the whole time that we have been going back: whereas we have all need to press forwards, as fast as we can. Therefore let the innocent of wilful sin preserve that treasure with the greatest circumspection; and the faulty return from their errors without delay. Let the young enter upon the way of righteousness with hearty resolution; and those of riper age persevere in it to the end. In a word, let us all, of every age, seriously consider, and faithfully practise, the obligations of religion. For *the vows of God are still upon us**, how long soever it be since they were first made, either by us, or for us;

* Psal. lvi. 12.

and it is in vain to forget what He will assuredly remember; or hope to be safe in neglecting what He expects us to do. But let us use proper diligence; and He will infallibly give us proper assistance, and confirm us all unto the end, that we may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now unto Him, who is able to keep us from falling, and to present us faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.

• 1 Cor. i. 8.

† Jude 24, 25.

THE END.

Lately Published,
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